



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

**Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter**  
April 30, 2023

## Suffering Sheep and Their Good Shepherd

### 1 Peter 2:19–25

*<sup>19</sup> For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup> For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. <sup>21</sup> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup> He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. <sup>23</sup> When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup> For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is known in the Church as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The readings, the Introit, the Collect of the Day, the hymns – these all carry the theme of the Lord as our Good Shepherd. The images that come to our mind on Good Shepherd Sunday are usually very peaceful and pleasant ones. We think of sheep grazing safely in green pastures, being led beside still waters. We picture Jesus carrying a lamb in His arms or across His shoulders. This is well and good. The shepherd imagery in the Bible is meant to inspire these pleasant images and warm emotions. It’s a very picturesque way of conveying to us the goodness of God and the closeness of His comfort and care. It creates a longing in us to hear the sweet gospel voice of our Good Shepherd and instills in us a sense of belonging to God’s flock, the Church.

But these warm and winning images become even more beautiful when we contrast them with other very dark and dangerous ones. In Psalm 23, for instance, those “green pastures” become all the greener because they stand against the “valley of the shadow of death.” In John 10, Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd who comes to give us abundant life, as opposed to the thief who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” These vivid contrasts make the warm images of the gospel all the more appealing and attractive.

So it is in today’s Epistle from 1 Peter 2. The reference to Christ as the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls comes right after a reminder that we were like sheep going astray. The contrast makes our Shepherd all the more precious to us. When we realize how lost we would be on our own, we appreciate more deeply the fact that we have a Shepherd to guard and guide us.

Besides our straying, there’s another negative aspect that makes us appreciate our



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Shepherd more, and that's our suffering. The unpleasant reality is that Christians suffer in this world, and when we do, it's reassuring to know that we have a loving Shepherd who's looking out for us and taking care of us. So, the theme of our message today is: "Suffering Sheep and Their Good Shepherd."

That's really how this text plays out. The first half is about the suffering sheep, the second half is about their Shepherd. Here's the part about the suffering of the sheep: "This is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps."

St. Peter is talking about the suffering sheep, that is, Christians who endure suffering. I should mention that not all suffering is due to our being Christians. Some suffering comes simply because we live in a fallen world where suffering just happens. There's no fault or blame; it just is. Sickness is usually a kind of suffering that's neither just nor unjust. It just happens.

But some suffering we bring on ourselves; we do wrong and suffer on account of it. That would be suffering justly, because we're receiving what we deserve. But other suffering comes unjustly, simply because we bear the name of Christ and do good in His name. So it's important to distinguish between these and to examine ourselves when we suffer, to see whether our suffering is just or unjust. The answer will depend on the actions which precipitated our suffering.

The first question to ask yourself, then, would be this: Am I suffering because of something wrong that I did? Did my sin bring this on me? Was I being a thoughtless jerk, and now my wife's mad at me? Did I fail to study for the test, and now the teacher's giving me a bad grade? Was I disregarding the speed limit, and now the policeman's giving me a ticket? In such cases, it's not that my wife or the teacher or the policeman is persecuting me; it's because I was a jerk or I failed to study or I was driving too fast – that's why I'm suffering. So, sometimes suffering is just the natural consequence of our own foolish behavior. If that's the case, then I need to repent of the wrong I've done, confess my sin, ask God's forgiveness – and that of the person I've offended – and endeavor to amend my sinful ways.

But there are other times when we Christians suffer precisely because we belong to Christ. We encounter suffering, not for any misbehavior on our part, but because of our good behavior. There are people who will belittle your good behavior in order to make themselves feel better about their bad behavior. You don't go along with the crowd, when the crowd is cheating or stealing or grumbling or . . . you name it. And so they put pressure on you to conform to the group. If you don't, you're rejected and ridiculed. That is unjust suffering.

So what do we do in those situations? How should we handle unjust suffering?



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Peter answers those questions by pointing us, not to a principle, but to a person – to Christ, our Lord. Suffering sheep look to their Shepherd. Peter says that Christ suffered, “leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” The Greek word translated here as “example” was used to refer to a piece of writing or drawing that’s placed under another sheet and then traced onto the upper sheet. So Jesus Christ, in His suffering, is our perfect model to copy, “that you might follow in his steps.” The idea here is that we would follow His tracks. We step into the footprints where Jesus has already led the way. We follow the path of His example.

“Look at how Jesus handled unjust suffering,” Peter says, “and follow his example: ‘When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten.’” Think of how Jesus conducted Himself during His arrest and trials, His beating and crucifixion. More precisely, think of what He did not do. “He did not revile in return . . . he did not threaten.” He could have – if anybody ever had a right, He did – but He didn’t. When confronted with the mean and wicked behavior of others, Jesus did not respond in kind.

What Jesus did, Peter says, was entrust Himself to God: He “continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” Even if the whole world made the wrong judgment in His case, Jesus knew that God would judge Him rightly. God would vindicate His innocent and righteous Servant. And God will see that justice is done in the end for you, even if it’s not being done now.

Now, it’s one thing to see Jesus as the example we ought to follow; it’s another thing to be able to follow it. And on our own, we can’t. But God gives us grace. Notice that twice here Peter says, “this is a gracious thing.” God gifts us with the grace and strength we need to follow our Savior’s example. God’s grace enables us to bear up and endure suffering, knowing that He is ultimately the one who will save us and vindicate us and even *reward* us for the sake His righteous Son. This is not our own doing. “This is a gracious thing.”

This is a gracious thing from start to finish. God’s grace in Christ is what makes us Christians in the first place, and it’s what will enable us to endure, even to the end. And so that’s where Peter takes his readers when he talks about the suffering they endure. He takes them to Christ. He takes them to the cross. He directs the suffering sheep to their Good Shepherd.

You see, when Peter writes about suffering, he can’t simply talk about Jesus as an example. Jesus is far more than our example. He’s our Savior. That’s why He suffered. Christ suffered “for you,” Peter says. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.” On that tree, the cross of Calvary, the sinless Son of God took all your sins upon Himself. For *you* He bore those wounds in His innocent hands and feet and side. For *you* the only righteous man who ever lived endured the most unjust suffering. For straying sheep like you and me, the Good Shepherd laid down His life on Good Friday, only to take it up again on Easter. Christ’s resurrection is the proof that what our Shepherd did in dying for the



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sheep was enough to overcome all suffering and death, that we may have life and have it abundantly.

“For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” Now the lost sheep have come home to their Shepherd. The contrast makes our Shepherd all the more dear to us. For we know where we would be without Him – lost and straying and vulnerable to all the dangers that would otherwise do us in. But now we have a Shepherd. We’re safe, saved for all eternity, no matter what suffering we may have to endure here and now.

Our Good Shepherd, the one who laid down His life for us, has risen from the dead and is now walking alongside of us, guiding us and guarding us as we travel through the wilderness of this world. He is the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. He’s watching out for us, looking out for our welfare. Yes, we have a Shepherd, a very Good Shepherd indeed. His name is Jesus. Suffering sheep or straying sheep – we happen to be both at one time or another. And suffering, straying sheep – people like you and me – we need a Shepherd just like Jesus.

Someone once described sheep as “animals with thick wooly coats and thick wooly heads.” Maybe we sheep need to be reminded from time to time to get it through our “thick wooly heads,” that we do have a Good Shepherd who is with us in our suffering and who’s taking care of us in the midst of it all. He cared so much that He Himself suffered and died for you. The Good Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep. Now He’s risen from the dead and is leading us to life everlasting. Our Shepherd calls His own sheep by name. We listen to His voice, and we follow Him. And we know that in all of our suffering and in all of our straying, our Good Shepherd will be with us every step of the way. When we stray, He comes and finds us and brings us home. When we suffer unjustly, He guards our souls and enables us to endure. The Good Shepherd is with His sheep. Beloved, this is a gracious thing! In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen